

# Between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism: *Juche* and the Case of Chŏng Tasan

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This article examines the Confucian component of the North Korean *juche* ideology, appraising the national-Stalinist doctrine in view of its relation to the Reformed Confucianism of Chŏng Tasan. A representative of the indigenous *sirhak* (practical learning) school in the late Chosŏn era, Tasan merits attention because he was politically endorsed in Kim Il Sung's 1955 *juche* speech and was popular in the 1960s. Studying the rise, fall, and revival of Tasan; Kim Jong Il's statements on behalf of the North Korean state bureaucracy; and the *juche* and Tasanist conceptions of "man," the author concludes that Tasan's Neo-Confucianism was assimilated into *juche* and that the *sirhak* scholar is being ideologically re-appreciated for regime legitimacy in North Korea today.

## Introduction

When Kim Il Sung delivered his anti-Soviet reformism *juche* speech to propagandists and agitators of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) on December 28, 1955, he made no references to the classical Marxists Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. As for Leon Trotsky, he was simply unthinkable. Despite Kim's training in Stalinism and Maoism from 1931 to 1945, he also did not mention his political mentors Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. Stressing the "Korean revolution" as the subject (*juche*) of party ideological work, the North Korean Stalinist leader emphasized the need to patriotically study national culture, national history,

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and national traditions. Moreover, as a national-Stalinist, he called for a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to North Korean conditions. Neo-Confucianism having been the state ideology of the feudal Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and Kim knowing more about Confucianism than Hegelian and Marxist philosophy,<sup>1</sup> it would seem reasonable to conclude that his emergent *juče* ideology was a political adaptation of Neo-Confucian thought. Historian Bruce Cumings, for instance, uses the phrases “Neo-Confucianism in a communist bottle” and “Chu Hsi in a Mao jacket.”<sup>2</sup> Other studies point to the structures of authority, bureaucracy, hierarchy, familism, filial piety, man-centeredness, mentalism, moral education, patriarchy, and respect for elders as confirmative of Neo-Confucianism in North Korea.<sup>3</sup> That, however, is not Neo-Confucianism, but generic Confucianism. Furthermore, where philosophical form and content are concerned, the national subjectivist *juče* ideology does not resemble Chu Hsi’s speculative objective idealism.<sup>4</sup> Not insignificantly, Kim Il Sung’s 1955 speech warned against the “negation of Korean history” with foreign ideas. Neo-Confucianism (Chinese), Marxism (German), Marxism-Leninism (Russian), and Maoism (Chinese) were inadequate candidates for postcolonial and post-Korean War national regeneration. Instead, Kim ordered the propagation of the indigenous *sirhak* (practical learning) school of Reformed Confucianism, referring specifically to the writer Pak Yŏnam (1737–1805) and the great philosophical synthesizer Chŏng Tasan (1762–1836). Tasan and his ideas would receive political attention from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s and become assimilated into *juče* ideology, which was constitutionalized in 1972.

## Kim Il Sung and the Claim of Tasan

The rise of Tasan in North Korea begins with the insufficiently appreciated twelfth paragraph of the 1955 *juče* speech, where Kim Il Sung criticized the Soviet-born and educated ethnic Korean Pak Ch’ang-ok. A leading theoretician of Marxism-Leninism in the WPK Soviet faction, Pak played a major role in establishing Marxist-Leninist ideology in North Korea during the Soviet military occupation of August 1945 to December 1948. Chairman of the State Planning Committee, Pak had served as director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the WPK Central Committee from 1950 to 1955 (he was succeeded by another important Soviet Korean, Pak Yŏng-bin, in February 1955); he was a recipient of the Order of the National Flag 1st Class; and he became vice-chairman of the WPK in August 1953. He was also closely connected with academics and

writers, as well as with left-liberal elements on the periphery of the party.<sup>5</sup> Pak, whose political allegiances were with the Soviet Union, was among the first who eventually challenged the orthodox Stalinist leadership of Kim Il Sung in the post-Stalin period. Kim, who noticed the threat of incipient Soviet “de-Stalinization” in early 1953, regarded the Soviet Koreans as agents of Moscow and opposed their Russification of Korean culture.<sup>6</sup> Delivering “On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing the Subject in Ideological Work” in 1955, he targeted Pak as a foreigner who was running counter to the fundamental national requirements of the Korean revolution and associating with “reactionary bourgeois” writers. Using a literary pretext, Kim admonished the WPK to study and publicize the native-born *sirhak* movement:

The errors made recently by [the Soviet Korean] Pak Chang Ok and *his kind*, too, were attributable to their negation of the history of the Korean literary movement. They closed their eyes to the struggle of the fine writers of the KAPF—Korean Association of Proletarian Writers—and to *the splendid works of Pak Yon Am, Jong Da San and other progressive scholars and writers of our country*. We told them to *make a profound study* of those things and *give them wide publicity*, but they did not do so.<sup>7</sup>

This is a well-known section of the *juche* speech, but the endorsement of *sirhak* has been overlooked by not a few specialists. For example, Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee paraphrase the paragraph, but do not mention Yŏnam and Tasan;<sup>8</sup> Masao Okonogi quotes the paragraph, but omits the sentence on studying and publicizing the Chosŏn-era scholars;<sup>9</sup> James F. Person quotes the paragraph in part, paraphrases the reference to Yŏnam and Tasan, and moves on;<sup>10</sup> Andrei N. Lankov, who has dealt closely with the assault on the Soviet Koreans, bypasses the paragraph altogether;<sup>11</sup> Jin Woong Kang, who has examined the acceptance and utilization of “traditional Confucianism” in North Korean state formation, has not considered the *sirhak* movement;<sup>12</sup> and Jae-Cheon Lim, who has made reference to the publication of Tasan’s *Mongmin simsŏ* in connection with factional activity inside the WPK in 1967, does not explore the presence of Tasan further.<sup>13</sup> Since the instilment of “national pride” (*minjokjŏk chabusim*), literally, “ethnic-racial pride,” was foundational to *juche* and Kim Il Sung’s accusations against Pak Ch’ang-ok, praise of the “splendid works” of the *sirhak* school must be investigated.

The official English translation “splendid works” (*usuhan chakp’um*) does not, to start with, capture the force of the original Korean. That, at least, is the case with American English. The word *usuhan* means excellent, outstanding, superior.<sup>14</sup> Pak being a major theoretician of Soviet

Marxism-Leninism, the political message Kim was sending to the WPK was clear: *Korean* ideology was more important than *Russian* ideology in North Korea. *Sirhak* was more important than Soviet Marxism-Leninism. Later in the speech, Kim added, “There can be no set principle that we must follow the Soviet fashion. Some advocate the Soviet way and others the Chinese, but is it not time *to work out our own?*” He underlined Marxist-Leninist “truth” and “principles” and the “essence” of the Soviet experience, but Marxism-Leninism had to be “creatively applied” to national conditions.<sup>15</sup> Pak’s fate was not immediately sealed, however. That would be determined after Nikita Khrushchev’s February 24–25, 1956, “secret speech” at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—which officialized so-called de-Stalinization in the Soviet Bloc—and when Pak attacked Kim’s personality cult and heavy industry-oriented economic policies.<sup>16</sup> As a leader of the anti-Kim coalition in the WPK that culminated in the 1956 August opposition, the Soviet Korean was stripped of his government positions, imprisoned, secretly tried, and finally executed in January 1960 in the course of Kim Il Sung’s Great Purge of 1956 to 1960,<sup>17</sup> an event that eliminated the Soviet and Yanan factions, placed Kim and his Manchurian guerrillas in complete power, and changed the psychological profile of the party to one that was ultranationalist and ultracentralist.

With the purge of the Russian- and Chinese-connected factions in the WPK, the Korean ideological requirements of *juche* could now be met. The star of Chŏng Tasan and *sirhak* philosophy would rise. Already in 1955, patriotic historiographic and political appraisals of the late Chosŏn-era scholar were being published by the Ministry of Culture and Propaganda and the State Publishing House, for example, *Progressive Scholars at the Close of the Feudal Age in Korea* (1955) and *The Sirhak School and Chŏng Tasan* (*Sirhak p’a wa Chŏng Tasan*, 1955).<sup>18</sup> These were followed by *The Life of Tasan Chŏng Yag-yong and a Chronology of His Works* (*Tasan Chŏng Yag-yong ŭi saengae wa chŏjak nyŏnbo*, 1956) from the DPRK Academy of Sciences Publishing House, *Selected Works of Chŏng Tasan* (*Chŏng Tasan sŏnjip*, 1957) from the State Publishing House, and *Selected Works of Chŏng Yag-yong* (*Chŏng Yag-yong chakp’um sŏnjip*, 1960) from the State Art Publishing House. On the two hundredth anniversary of Tasan, more works related to him were released by the DPRK Academy of Sciences, such as *Philosophy of the Korean Feudal Period* (*Chosŏn ponggŏn sigi ch’ŏrhak*, 1962), *The Economic Thought of Chŏng Tasan* (*Chŏng Tasan ŭi kyŏngje sasang*, 1962), and *Chŏng Tasan: 200th Anniversary Commemoration Anthology of Tasan Chŏng Yag-yong*

(Chŏng Tasan: Tasan Chŏng Yag-yong t'ansaeng 200-chunyŏn kinyŏm nonmunjip, 1962). There was also *A Treatise on Governing the People Justly* (Mongmin simsŏ, 3 vols., 1962) from the Academy of Sciences Publishing House. In addition, the Workers' Party of Korea Publishing House released *The Patriotism of Chŏng Tasan and His Activities* (Chŏng Tasan ŭi aegukchuŭi wa kŭ ŭi hwalton, 1963), and there even appeared *Teacher Chŏng Tasan* (Chŏng Tasan sŏnsaengnim, 1963) from the Children's Books Publishing House.

Of particular significance is the fact that North Korean stamps honoring Tasan as a famous person were printed in 1960 and 1962. There is arguably no coincidence that the first stamp of Tasan and the first stamp of Kim Il Sung both appeared in 1960 at the end of Kim's Great Purge. Gabriel Jonsson observes that stamp motifs are not arbitrary and that stamps are a channel for disseminating information used by the authorities. That is to say, the stamp is a political medium. Jonsson explains that North Korean stamps with pre-1945 historical themes do not commemorate history, but stress the continuity of Kim Il Sung and his anti-Japanese guerrillas. Stamps of Tasan, however, ceased being printed after 1962.<sup>19</sup> What is apparent here is that the stamps of Tasan and Kim released in 1960 constituted a political victory statement, saying that Kim was the inheritor and successor of the great national and cultural traditions of Korea. The subsequent disappearance of the *sirhak* scholar was a consequence of the increasing Kim Il Sung personality cult. Despite Kim's valorization of Yŏnam and Tasan in 1955 and the flood of books on Tasan and *sirhak* in the 1950s and 1960s, the eclipse of Tasan in North Korean stamps was an indication of things to come in the development of *juche* ideology.

The endnotes of the 1965 English edition of the first volume of Kim Il Sung's *Selected Works* describe Pak Yŏnam as a representative of *sirhak* "who made a great contribution to the development of advanced thoughts and sciences in Korea." He was a "distinguished realist writer" with a "progressive and materialistic" world outlook; he held that learning should serve "practical problems"; and he expressed the "interests of the peasantry."<sup>20</sup> Chŏng Tasan was celebrated as the great systemizer of *sirhak* when it reached its apogee in the eighteenth century. "Jong took over the scholarly achievements in politics, economy, history, geography, philosophy, literature, music, engineering, architecture, medicine and mathematics of his predecessors and, carrying them forward, enriched them with new content. He wrote more than 500 books."<sup>21</sup> This description is not an exaggeration. Tasan, who had assistants, was a prodigious intellect, a

highly original and critical thinker, and the first Korean scholar to reform scholastic Neo-Confucianism with Western religion (Catholicism), philosophy, and science in the late feudal era. Tasan, however, had the misfortune of being forced out of Chosŏn politics by his enemies and arriving too late on the historical scene. His reform ideas were never practiced, and seventy-four years after his death, Japanese imperialism brought Korea into the twentieth century with neither reference nor recourse to Tasan's vast intellectual contributions. As South Korean academic Kyong-Dong Kim aptly put it, Tasan represents an "aborted Confucian reformation."<sup>22</sup>

Because Tasan's reform ideas were never implemented, he could more easily be claimed by Kim Il Sung and regarded in North Korean nationalist historiography as something of a proto-socialist, especially with regard to his ideas of village cooperative farming and the village as a military unit to increase the self-defense capacity of the state.<sup>23</sup> There was also Tasan's desire to end the centuries-long tributary relationship with China, which was interpreted in North Korea as indicative of his resolute patriotism. Tasan sought a merit-based government and the end of bureaucratic corruption; however, he did not think outside the agrarian socioeconomic structure of feudalism, nor was he a radical, republican, and democrat in social and political philosophy. He accepted monarchy and the traditional class divisions of feudal Korea, saying, "[T]here are four categories of people: scholars [i.e., *yangban*], peasants, artisans, and merchants." Scholars are "those who learn how to govern people."<sup>24</sup> Tasan stemmed from the *yangban* elite, and his reform programs included plans to guard against peasant insurrection.<sup>25</sup> Tasan, in other words, was no Thomas Münzer.<sup>26</sup> However progressive the gifted *sirhak* scholar's reform ideas were in the context of his epoch, he was not a truly radical reformationist, but a social utopian who believed in the practice of moral ideas and moral cultivation in government as a remedy for social ills. There are elements here that are resonant with *juche*.

### Kim Jong Il on *Sirhak* and Tasan

Eleven years after the 1955 *juche* speech, it had become clear to the North Korean national-Stalinist leadership that the "profound study" and "wide publicity" of *sirhak* and Tasan that had been previously called for was counterproductive to justifying the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung and was actually replacing *juche* in significance. That is not surprising in view of Tasan's great intellectual stature and monumental literary and scientific output, against which the person and political speeches of Kim Il Sung

would appear to be of lesser substance and national authority. Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, served as the mouthpiece for this realization. Working in the Department of Organization and Guidance of the Central Committee of the WPK, he delivered an October 28, 1966, speech titled "Let Us Enhance the Role of the Media in Implementing the Decisions of the Party Conference" to officials of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the WPK, journalists, and editors, expressing the following:

Recently, publications have been giving publicity to the "patriotic spirit of independence" which is said to have been advocated by the school of *Silhak* in the feudal ages, but it has nothing in common with our Party's revolutionary idea of establishing *Juche*. If the Party members and other working people are equipped with the "spirit of independence" advocated by the *Silhak* school, it will be impossible to champion and implement our Party's line of independence and establish *Juche* in the revolution and construction. The fact that these publications are giving prominence to the proposition of the *Silhak* school of feudal society and giving publicity to it as the spirit of independence using the excuse of establishing *Juche* in opposition to sycophancy shows that the officials in charge of the media and journalists themselves do not seem to have a clear knowledge of how the *Juche* idea was established and what is the revolutionary essence of this idea.<sup>27</sup>

The problem with *sirhak* had been underway for eleven years, except it was not considered a problem until the mid-1960s. Kim Jong Il ordered the media to rectify matters with in-depth propaganda of the "*juche* idea" (*juche sasang*) among party members and working people. One should note that *juche* was first transliterated as "Jooche" in 1961 in documents of the 4th Congress of the WPK and was already understood as an ideology in 1962;<sup>28</sup> North Korean sources in English were no longer translating the word as "subject" in 1964;<sup>29</sup> it was introduced internationally as "independent stand" and "spirit of self-reliance" in 1965;<sup>30</sup> and it became the "only idea of the party" at the 5th Congress of the WPK in 1970.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, *juche* was not a philosophy proper—it was a national-Stalinist political program and political slogan conceived in response to the unfolding Soviet "de-Stalinization" campaign, the Sino-Soviet dispute and split, and the curtailment of Soviet and Chinese economic assistance. The unremarkable origin of *juche* and Kim Jong Il's position in the 1966 speech suggest that *sirhak* got the wide publicity Kim Il Sung demanded (through reference to Pak Yŏnam and Chŏng Tasan in 1955) because *sirhak* was a genuine philosophical system, and its representatives had genuine intellectual achievements to their names. Kim Il Sung was not a philosopher, and *juche* ideology could not compete against *sirhak*.

On May 25, 1967, Kim Il Sung called for the establishment of *juche* in all spheres of life in his Ten-Point Program. Having laid the political and programmatic fundamentals of the doctrine, the North Korean leader commissioned WPK theoretician and Moscow-trained philosopher Hwang Chang-yŏp to develop *juche* into a nationalist theory of history.<sup>32</sup> Kim Jong Il, who as a university student had been tutored by Hwang, was assigned to the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the WPK that year. There, the future heir reasserted his earlier criticism against the unabating popularity of *sirhak* and Tasan, this time in circumstances that were similar to Kim Il Sung's criticism of the Soviet Korean Pak Ch'ang-ok twelve years earlier. After all, 1967 was the year of Kim's second major purge of the WPK, an event he used to defeat inner-party opposition to the policy of military build-up he advanced at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 4th Central Committee of the WPK in December 1962. On June 15, 1967, Kim Jong Il delivered "On Stamping Out the Ideologically Evil Consequences of the Anti-Party, Counter-Revolutionary Elements and Establishing the Party's Monolithic Ideological System" to his new department. *Sirhak* and Tasan were now associated with the opposition and branded as reactionary relics of the feudal past:

Instead of propagandizing the revolutionary idea of our Party, the anti-Party, counter-revolutionary elements spread, to a large extent, alien and reactionary ideologies such as bourgeois ideology, revisionist ideology and feudal-Confucian ideas. Under the call to preserve the traits of our nation and establish *Juche*, they, preaching feudal-Confucian ideas, attempted to restore indiscriminately the outdated and backward ways of the past that do not suit our socialist life. They were so devoid of class awareness and degenerated politically that it becomes obvious from the fact that instead of publishing large volumes of our Party literature and materials for education in the revolutionary traditions for the working people, they ordered that a large amount of books by the scholars of the *Sirhak* School were published and claimed that the *Mokmin Simso*, by Jong Ta San, was a must read for cadres and Party organizations. Some people, under the excuse of sustaining the fine manners and customs unique to Korea, ordered that girl students should be taught how to make an obeisance and that girls should ride in a palanquin on their wedding-day.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to *Mongmin simsŏ*, an originally forty-eight-*kwŏn* (volume) work completed in 1818, is telling. The title translates literally as "Governing People Heart-Mind Book," or *A Treatise on Governing the People Justly*. Tasan, who was against orthodox Neo-Confucianism, advanced several important reform proposals in this work, which was written to guide local government officials away from abusive, corrupt, and decadent practices.<sup>34</sup>



On July 3, 1967, Kim Jong Il delivered another speech, “On the Firm Establishment of the Party’s Monolithic Ideological System among Writers and Artists,” this time to senior officials in the fields of party ideological work and art and literature. Tasan and *sirhak* were acknowledged as part of the Korean national heritage, but *Mongmin simsŏ* was denounced as false, deceptive, hypocritical, and useless for ideological guidance:

Officials in charge of Party ideological work also failed to establish sound working-class principles.

If they had upheld sound working-class principles, they would have quickly discovered that it was an anti-Party act in conflict with our Party’s idea for anti-Party, counter-revolutionary elements to impose on them a book such as *Mokmin Simso*, written by a scholar of the *Silhak* school in the feudal epoch as an essential text. Of course, the ideas of the *Silhak* school and books such as *Mokmin Simso* are part of the national cultural heritage and have a certain significance in the history of our country, but they cannot provide the guiding principles for our officials in their work today. *Mokmin Simso* contains the words “patriotism” and “love of the people” but they have nothing in common with the patriotism and popularly-based spirit of which we communists speak. There are lots of beautiful words full of falsehood, deception and hypocrisy in the other books, too.<sup>35</sup>

Kim Jong Il’s ritualistic reference to “working-class principles” was not motivated by actual concern for North Korean workers. The state apparatus of the North Korean *deformed workers’ state* stood outside the control of the masses and was administered by a bureaucratic caste that was anxious of losing its social privileges.<sup>36</sup> The Reformed Confucianism of Tasan was not serving those interests. There is a possibility that in denouncing Tasan’s *Mongmin simsŏ*, Kim Jong Il may have been attempting to recreate on North Korean tactical terms the anti-Confucian campaign ushered in China under Mao Zedong’s ultra-leftist Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In 1966, the ancient grave of Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE) was desecrated, his remains thrown to the wind, and his tomb robbed.<sup>37</sup> North Korea witnessed the virtual Maoization of its political life and culture industry in the 1960s, as seen in the guerrilla tradition, mass line, revolutionary operas, Mao suits and caps, and book- and rifle-wielding iconography. Kim Il Sung and his Manchurian guerrillas had, after all, served as anti-Japanese partisans under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from 1931 to 1941, Kim having joined the CCP in 1931; North Korean troops fought with the CCP in the Chinese civil war (1945–1950); and following the United States and United Nations military intervention in the Korean War (1950–1953), North Korea was occupied by China until 1958, coming under strong Maoist influence.

Both regimes also rejected the postwar Soviet “de-Stalinization” campaign and policy of “peaceful coexistence” with world capitalism. North Korea did not, however, resort to the Maoist iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution, which was regarded as “national nihilism.” North Korea occasionally employed the Maoist trope of workers, peasants, and soldiers, but it was not state policy to denounce intellectuals as in Mao’s China.<sup>38</sup> While intellectuals as a social group have always posed a “special problem” for the WPK,<sup>39</sup> they are formally represented in the symbols of the party (the hammer, sickle, and writing brush) and continue to be so despite the ascension of soldiers with the *songun* (military-first) policy in the post-Soviet 1990s.

North Korean publications on Tasan and *sirhak* appear to have been discouraged by Kim Jong Il’s political warnings to the WPK in the mid-1960s. By 1970, however, there was a noticeable change in his tone. This is seen in the March 4, 1970, speech to officials of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the WPK, “On Proper Evaluation and Treatment of the Cultural Heritage of Our Nation with a Correct Viewpoint and Attitude.” Notably, Kim said Tasan and other *sirhak* scholars were partially progressive and should not be ignored.

We must also guard against the tendency to embellish individual persons or works of the past age and to distort them.

In the past some scholars spoke very highly of Jong Ta San and other proponents of the *Silhak* school, pronouncing him to be even more prominent than Marx. Of course, the doctrines of this school contained some progressive elements. But they can never be superior to Marxism, which for the first time presented the revolutionary ideas of the working class.

Other scholars exaggerated the value of the works of the past to such an extent that they even claimed these ancient works to be better than those of the present day. How can they be better than the works of art and literature today, which have been created on the basis of socialist realism? This is impossible.

We must thoroughly rebuff those erroneous views that praise and attempt to revive the outdated and reactionary elements of the past.

We oppose the tendency to overestimate Jong Ta San and other *Silhak* scholars, contrary to the fact, and distort history; nevertheless, we do not mean that the *Silhak* school should be ignored in history.

We should ensure that things of the past are shown or taught to our people so as to contribute to their education in socialist patriotism and communism.

We must clearly distinguish between progressive, popular elements and the outmoded, reactionary elements of the cultural heritage of our nation and inherit and develop the progressive, people-oriented elements critically, in keeping with modern aesthetic tastes and revolutionary requirements.<sup>40</sup>

But this was not simply Kim Jong Il's view. He was restating policy terms from Kim Il Sung's consultative meeting speech "On Some Questions about Dealing with Our National and Cultural Heritage," delivered a month earlier to artists, educators, scientists, and writers on February 17, 1970. *Sirhak* and Tasan were mentioned in the following context:

We must, in particular, thoroughly oppose the tendency to overestimate works of literature and art and individual persons of the past and to exaggerate or distort historical facts.

At one time, some scholars exaggerated the value of the works of the past by saying that they were better than those of the present day. They were mistaken. How can it be that novels, sculptures or pictures from the past are better than those of today which are created on the basis of socialist realism? This is absolutely impossible.

In the past some people spoke very highly of the proponents of the *Sirhak* school. Of course, the doctrines of this school contained some progressive elements. So there is no harm in reading books by its supporters. But we must not overestimate these scholars. The inflated evaluation which was made of Chong Da San and other *Sirhak* scholars in the past has to be corrected.<sup>41</sup>

One can surmise from these passages that far-reaching interest in Chŏng Tasan and *sirhak* was aroused among party members and the general population after Kim Il Sung's political endorsement of the excellent, outstanding, superior work of the *sirhak* school in his 1955 *juče* speech. The "wide publicity" given to Tasan in printed matter in the 1950s and 1960s, however, had ideological consequences that Kim and the North Korean state bureaucracy did not anticipate, namely, that Tasan would outshine the North Korean leader, the *juče*-Stalinist program, and the Kim Il Sung personality cult. Tasan was thus attacked as a feudal reactionary, and adulation of him and his intellectual achievements was prohibited. This sudden change of course must have appeared jarring and unjustifiable to many within and outside the party. Therefore, a concession was made on how to properly handle Tasan and his school, lest things become unmanageable. Tasan was great, but not greater than Karl Marx.<sup>42</sup> Before the 1970s, the last stamp of Tasan in 1962 was followed by a commemorative stamp of Marx in 1963 and one of Engels in 1965. Stamps with Lenin appeared in 1960, 1964, 1965, and 1967. As a "creatively applied" form of Marxism-Leninism to national conditions, *juče* needed to exploit the prestige of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and the Russian Revolution, but eliminating Tasan altogether would have undercut Kim Il Sung's claim to the "Korean revolution" and to the national prerequisites of *juče*. That is why the *juče* doctrine, especially its concep-

tion of “man,” evinces strong similarities to the philosophical anthropology of the Neo-Confucian scholar. *Juche* became a Stalinism-Tasanism. Interestingly, the Social Science Publishing House released a book in 1974 titled *The Philosophical Thought and Sociopolitical Views of the Sirhak School* (Sirhakup’a ŭi ch’ŏlhaksasang kwa sahoechongchi’jok kyŏnhae). Tasan, however, would be regarded as a supporter of feudalism and Confucianism into the 1980s.<sup>43</sup>

## **Juche Ideology and Tasan’s Anthropology**

In 1972, *juche* was officially enshrined as the state ideology of North Korea and defined in the newly adopted *Socialist Constitution* as a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism to our country’s reality” as per Kim Il Sung’s 1955 *juche* speech.<sup>44</sup> The 1970s also saw the presentation of *juche* as a philosophy (*ch’ŏrhak*). Like the Greek word *philosophia*, “love of wisdom,” the Korean equivalent, *ch’ŏrhak*, means “wise learning.” *Juche*, however, could never be a legitimate philosophy, which, to paraphrase Epictetus, begins with perception, inquiry, criticism, investigation, and discovery.<sup>45</sup> Modern philosophy, in particular, which was founded by René Descartes in the seventeenth century, concerns itself with fundamental problems of aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, logic, ontology, and politics, using the instruments of reason, argument, analysis, and discursive-scientific thinking. In contrast, *juche* “philosophy,” which is a political religion in the sociological sense, operates in a premodern and prescientific conceptual mode—on faith, authority, dogmatics, and miraculous thinking. The ideology as “philosophy” is summed up in the anthropocentric axiom “man is the master of everything and decides everything,” a claim that is meaningless on logical and naturalistic grounds.<sup>46</sup> That notion, however, is the inheritance of an archaic Confucian idea, preceding both Neo-Confucianism and *sirhak*, that puts human beings at the center of the natural universe. As Alison Harley Black explains in her study of the seventeenth-century Chinese Neo-Confucian Wang Fu-chih:

The idea that there is no cosmos apart from man was very old in Confucianism. According to its specific formulation, man was considered as one of a trio along with Heaven and Earth, and hence of the “three fundaments” (*san shih* or *san tuan*) of the universe. Whereas Heaven lavished life on things impartially, it fell to man as the most refined product of this process to discriminate, evaluate, choose, and regulate what Nature provided. In some forms of Confucianism, the very elements of Nature were supposed to be affected by human morality. In general, it was assumed both that man was a significant element on his own account in the cosmos and that Nature itself was in some sense incomplete without him.<sup>47</sup>

Kim Il Sung formally introduced the man-centered Confucian principle in his September 17, 1972, document *On Some Problems of Our Party's Juche Idea and the DPRK Government's Internal and External Policies*. Written in response to a questionnaire from the Japanese daily *Mainichi shimbun*, this was an exclusively political and nonphilosophical work, discussing national independence, North Korean foreign policy, Korean reunification, and North Korea–Japan relations. Kim briefly said, “The basis of the *Juche* idea is that man is the master of all things and decides everything. Remaking nature and society is also for people and it is the work done by them. Man is the most precious in the world and it is also man who is the most powerful.”<sup>48</sup> The philosophical content of *juche* would never advance beyond this simplistic anthropocentrism and populism. A middle school expellee, the North Korean leader assigned the task of transforming *juche* into a “philosophy” to his son Kim Jong Il, who was not a specialist in such matters and possessed only a bachelor’s degree in (Stalinist) political economy. One should recall that Karl Marx had a doctoral degree in philosophy, and his lifelong collaborator, Frederick Engels, despite being withdrawn by his father from high school at seventeen, was intellectually talented, attended courses at Berlin University, and was initiated into philosophy with his 1841 study of the German idealist F. W. J. Schelling.<sup>49</sup>

Kim Jong Il’s major writings on *juche* as “philosophy” include his speeches to WPK theoretical propagandists, “On Some Questions in Understanding the *Juche* Philosophy” (1974) and “On Correctly Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism” (1976); his officially termed “treatise” for the National Seminar on *Juche* in honor of Kim Il Sung’s seventieth birthday, “On the *Juche* Idea” (1982); his speech to senior officials of the Central Committee of the WPK, “On Some Problems of Education in the *Juche* Idea” (1986); and his essay in the WPK theoretical journal *Kulloja*, “The *Juche* Philosophy Is an Original Revolutionary Philosophy” (1996). These documents are considerably unsophisticated as far as philosophy and its specialized areas of inquiry are concerned. Philosophy is a critical search for truth that investigates all pre-given reality and all pre-given conceptions in order to make sense of the world. That is something *juche* ideology does not do, thus abandoning the social function and social role of philosophy. *Juche* in Kim’s writings is not argued but asserted, composed of an elementary and recursive set of axioms, slogans, and syllogisms. Revealingly, the entire “philosophical” substance of the ideology is contained in the first two speeches from the 1970s. The other works are restatements, and the last one only adds that “*Juche* is an absolute truth,” that is to say, *juche* ideology is not fallible. The logical outcome of this infallibilism is irrationalism. That is seen in Kim’s subsequent essay

“On Preserving the *Juche* Character and National Character of the Revolution and Construction” (1997), the national-populism of which resorts to mysticism. Kim speaks of the blood, soul, and destiny of the Korean nation as transcending distinctions of class, strata, and social system.<sup>50</sup>

The speeches from 1974 and 1976 are forthright as to what *juche* is and what it is not. Among the things it is not, *juche* is not humanism (*ingan ch'orhak*), Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, or historical materialism. According to Kim, humanism is a reactionary bourgeois philosophy that sees “man” as dominated by instinct, powerless, and isolated from the world, resulting in sorrow, pessimism, and ultra-egoism. As for Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism and historical materialism, he says the former only clarifies objective universal laws, while the latter merely applies the general laws of the material world to history. Where man is concerned, materialist dialectics is said to be restricted to a definition of man’s essence as the ensemble of the social relations. The fundamental question of philosophy in dialectical materialism, Kim states, is the consciousness/matter and thinking/being relationship. Matter and being are primary, but that is insufficient. *Juche*, he asserts, is a new discovery and a new philosophy. The fundamental question of philosophy for *juche* is the “position and role of man in the world.” Man is a material being, subject to the laws of the material world, and is the product of evolution. But man is also a social being, distinguished from other creatures by certain mental and physical functions. His “essential features” are independence (*chajusŏng*), creativity (*chajosŏng*), and consciousness (*ũshiksŏng*). Altogether, these are the “social attributes” of man. Definition-wise, independence is the “life and soul” (*saengmyŏng*) of man, the social and historical *desire and will* of man to become the master of the world and shaper of his destiny; creativity is the *ability to carry out* the desires and will of man; and consciousness is the *prerequisite* of desire, will, and ability. By virtue of these social attributes, man is able to dominate and transform nature and society. Therefore, “man is the master of everything and decides everything.” Recognition that man is the “main factor” raises his *dignity and value*. That, according to Kim, is the originality and accomplishment of *juche*, which is the philosophical core of the political theory of Kimilsungism (*Kim Il-sŏng chu'ui*). Kim Jong Il calls the doctrine named after his father a perfect theory that goes beyond the historical limitations, predictions, and suppositions of Marx and Lenin, guiding the North Korean “popular masses” in the national construction of “socialism in one country” (*han nara sahoechu'ui*). Kimilsungism is “closely connected” to (Soviet Stalinist) Marxism-Leninism, Kim admits. They, however, are different. Marxism-Leninism has been superseded by Kimilsungism.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Kim Jong Il, from the point of view of philosophy, clearly reveals what *juche* consists of. The components are antiquarian anthropocentrism, pragmatic voluntarism, social utopianism, nationalist Stalinism, and vulgar materialism. Kim does not understand Marx's 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach"—where reference to the human essence as the ensemble of the social relations is found and described as part of the *historical process*.<sup>52</sup> Kim's claims are confuted both by Marx's theses and also Engels's 1886 *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, to say nothing of Lenin's 1909 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. When Engels spoke in his own work of "the great basic question" (die grosse Grundfrage) of all philosophy as the relation of "thinking and being" (Denken und Sein), he was talking about the fundamental relationship between idealism and materialism.<sup>53</sup> As scientific materialists and non-bourgeois humanists, Marx and Engels drew their philosophical conclusions on the basis of dialectical method, the materialist conception of history, and empirical verification. Those conclusions are summed up in the words of Marx's 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."<sup>54</sup> Kim Jong Il does not grasp the crucial significance of this proposition. Making "man" the great basic question of philosophy, he turns to subjective idealism and indeterminism. *Juche*, in fact, is far more primitive and unscientific than the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, whom Marx and Engels criticized for ahistorical and inconsistent materialism. Engels's final appraisal of the Feuerbachian conception of "man" is, nonetheless, perfectly applicable to *juche*—it is a "cult of abstract man" that inevitably leads back to idealism and religion; it must be "replaced by the science of real men and of their historical development" in class society.<sup>55</sup> The theological turn of the North Korean doctrine in 1986 confirms that philosophical appraisal.<sup>56</sup> *Juche* is not a philosophy, but an ideology of political justification for the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung. That said, what is the connection to Chŏng Tasan?

Philosophically, Tasan has been described in the scholarly literature as an empiricist, materialist, positivist, pragmatist, realist, and utilitarian. With respect to materialism and positivism, the *sirhak* scholar did not actually adhere to either philosophical orientation. Materialism maintains that all reality consists of one fundamental substance, namely, matter and its objective movement. Positivism, on the other hand, eschews all reductions of reality to fundamental substances (matter or spirit) as dogmatism and assumes an agnostic position. On the contrary, Tasan believed that there was a material universe, consisting of *both* matter and spirit, and

that beyond this physical reality, there was an immaterial and transcendent domain occupied by the mysterious creator and mover of all things, *Shangje*, or God. Tasan was a Catholic—his Christian name was John—and he adopted theological ideas and paradigms from Jesuit scholar Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (Tianzhu shiyi, 1603), a work that argued for the compatibility of Catholicism and Confucianism.<sup>57</sup> Rather than being a materialist or positivist, Tasan was a theological dualist and, in this sense, not on par with the vulgar materialism of *juche* espoused by Kim Jong Il in the 1970s. Kim Jong Il, however, makes several Tasanist-sounding statements in his speeches, such as, "Man, not nature, holds the position of master in the material world."<sup>58</sup> South Korean professor of philosophy Haechang Choung describes Tasan's view of "man" as follows:

For Tasan, man is not the son of nature. Man is the only creature that can escape the moral fatalism that follows from the predetermined rules of nature. Man goes beyond nature through freedom of choice, self-consciousness, and other qualities that are due to the function of his mind. The starting point for Tasan's philosophy of mind is, then, found in his belief that the inclinations of the mind cannot be explained by the methods, schemes, and principles of the natural sciences.

[...] Tasan understood the human mind not as a transcendental entity but an object grounded in the qualities of desire and will. Removing these desires is the same as giving up life. In other words, desire is the prime mover for all activity. Unlike the *ch'i* understood by the Neo-Confucian literati, Tasan's *ch'i* is the life force in each individual, manifested in qualities such as metabolism, self-perception, and self-preservation. There is no difference between men and animals in this aspect. Men are differentiated by virtue of their moral abilities.<sup>59</sup>

The *sirhak* scholar was a deist in his conception of human affairs. *Shangje*, even as the object of human worship, did not directly intervene in the material world, which Tasan held was governed by empirical and physical laws and human moral choices. Human beings, for Tasan, were physically composed social and ethical beings who possessed autonomy (desire and will), consciousness, creativity, and socially developed morality and were thereby separate from nature. The human being was the lord, and nature was the servant. Human consciousness, moreover, contained an element of *Shangje's* divine consciousness, making the human a sacred being, the most powerful being in the material universe. The *juche* idea of "man" may thus be seen as an adaptation of Tasan's theological anthropology on vulgar materialist foundations.



Politically, there are few things in common between Tasan's revision of Neo-Confucianism and the totalitarian North Korean *juche* doctrine. Tasanism, for one, is the critical reformist philosophy of an agricultural feudal state in decay, and *juche* is the conservative ideology of an industrial Stalinist state in crisis. That is to say, the individual ideologies are cultural reflexes of two historically divergent socioeconomic formations. Tasan rejected the rigidified orthodoxies of Neo-Confucian thought and practice; while he was a supporter of feudal monarchy, his socioethical doctrine opposed autocracy, bureaucracy, and noblesse privilege; and in his scientific research, he was a practitioner of the inductive method. Of the few remote similarities to *Juche*, these consist of the following: Tasan maintained that China was not the center of the world, that any country could be the center (North Korea embraces national solipsism); he sought independence from the subjugated status of Korea in the imperial tributary relationship<sup>60</sup> (North Korea opposes submission to great powers); he proposed, albeit inconsistently, that Koreans did not descend from Chinese migrations, but were native to the peninsula<sup>61</sup> (North Korea maintains that the Korean Peninsula is a cradle of humankind); and he advocated the nationalization of land and mines<sup>62</sup> (North Korea is based on the nationalization of land, means of production, banks, and industries). Tasan also espoused a "people-oriented" (*minbon*) theory of history. Basically, history began with people living collectively in villages. They quarreled and could find no solution, but then came an old man who solved their problems, and the people made him village chief. Different chiefs from different villages gathered. Choosing one among themselves, the chiefs made him king. The king existed for the people and would thereupon be appointed by the will of the people.<sup>63</sup>

Consonant with this narrative is Tasan's conception of the ideal man (*mongja*), an ideal leader, who practices self-cultivation, good government, and care for the people. The *mongja* is a benevolent king.<sup>64</sup> Tasan's feudal nationalism, populism, and monarchism find echoes or resonances in the *juche* theory of history. WPK theoretician Hwang Chang-yŏp was commissioned to develop in the late 1960s, the thesis of which is that since primitive communism and the future communist society are classless societies, the driving force of history must be viewed from the perspective of the "people," not from the perspective of class.<sup>65</sup> That is a rejection of the sociohistorical premise of the materialist conception of history: "The [written] history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."<sup>66</sup> People-oriented *juche* history, which is really nationalist leader-centered history, serves to justify the North Korean state and the

“benevolent leader” Kim Il Sung. By 1986, Kim Jong Il was espousing the concept of the leader, the party, and the masses as an “immortal socio-political organism,” with the leader as the “top brain” of the body politic.<sup>67</sup> Prior to this, Kim Il Sung was being referred to in WPK publications as a “supreme brain.”<sup>68</sup> Such authoritarian corporeal metaphors, though reminiscent of the Hobbesian Leviathan—the state as a social group that composes an “artificial man”—are not unprecedented in Northeast Asia. For example, the Korean Neo-Confucian Chŏng To-jŏn (1342–1398) said the “mind of the king is the foundation of government,”<sup>69</sup> and the Chinese Neo-Confucian Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) called China “one man.”<sup>70</sup> *Juche*-Stalinism appropriates conceptual categories from generic Confucianism on the one hand and the late feudal ideas of Tasan on the other. These appropriations were politically assimilated into the theoretical substructure of *juche* ideology by the 1970s, uncredited, and presented in national-Stalinist form as original and “revolutionary” ideas to legitimate the dictatorial rule of Kim Il Sung.

## Reembracing *Sirhak* and Tasan

With the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries in 1989 to 1991, Marxism-Leninism was discredited. Kim Jong Il was already reflecting seriously on the disintegrating world Stalinist system and problems of Soviet Marxism-Leninism in his December 27, 1990, speech to senior officials of the Central Committee of the WPK, “Socialism of Our Country Is a Socialism of Our Style as Embodied by the *Juche* Idea.” Responding to the loss of its greatest economic benefactor and the ensuing ideological crisis—*juche*, after all, was on record for nineteen years in the North Korean constitution as a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism”—the Pyongyang regime finally decided to delete all references to the Soviet Stalinist ideology in its 1992 revised constitution. Because *juche* was ultimately a compound of Marxism-Leninism and Tasanism, and since the Marxist-Leninist component could no longer serve to adequately justify the nationalist Kim Il Sung regime, the consequence would be the reembrace of Chŏng Tasan. Coming full circle, Kim Jong Il now began to speak of the *sirhak* movement and its foremost representatives in terms recalling the twelfth paragraph of his father’s *juche* speech of December 28, 1955. The rearticulation of the original stand on *sirhak* can be found in Kim Jong Il’s January 20, 1992, work titled *On Juche Literature*:

The literature of the *Silhak* School must also be given a fair appraisal and treatment.

Lamenting the corruption of the aristocrats, their empty talk, and the backwardness of the crumbling feudal state, the *Silhak* faction fought for social progress and civilization under the slogan of “studying what is useful in practice,” and produced *excellent works* of art and literature, contributing to ushering in the dawn of our modern literature. *The theory of social reform and literary works of Pak Yon Am and Jong Ta San were created 200 years ago, but they were very progressive in those days and we can take pride in them.*

As a matter of course, the writers affiliated with this school, owing to their class limitations—they were born into the aristocratic class—confined themselves to criticizing individual corrupt and incompetent noblemen and wicked bureaucrats; they failed to represent the fundamental interests of the working masses and to insist on the idea of a thoroughgoing reform. In the past some people appreciated only the positive aspects of *Silhak* literature and exaggerated them, failing to see its limitations.

Neglecting or negating *Silhak* literature or not appraising its achievements properly is an expression of national nihilism. We must give prominence to, and feel proud of, all the talented writers and artistes our nation has produced.

The field of art and literature should newly publish the works produced by the *Silhak* writers and give worldwide publicity to them. It can also organize meetings to study the works.<sup>71</sup>

There is no doubt that Kim Jong Il reread or had the *juche* speech in mind in composing these passages. In the 1955 criticism of the Soviet Koreans and their leading Marxist-Leninist theoretician, Pak Ch’ang-ok, Kim Il Sung warned against the “negation” of Korean literary history, praised the “excellent works” of the “progressive” feudal scholars Yŏnam and Tasan, and demanded “profound study” and “wide publicity” of *sirhak* for the purposes of “national pride” and the ideological program of the “Korean revolution.” Thirty-seven years later—an intervening period in the late 1960s consisting of Kim Jong Il’s denouncing Tasan as a feudal reactionary because party and non-party people took more interest in him than in Kim Il Sung and *juche* ideology—Kim Jong Il warns against “national nihilism” and “negating” the “excellent works” of the “very progressive” feudal scholars Yŏnam and Tasan, the “pride” of the nation, who must not only be republished, but given “prominence” and “worldwide publicity” and be the focus of study meetings.

The sudden death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 and the North Korean Great Famine of 1996 to 1999 furthered the ideological crisis of the Pyongyang regime. Notwithstanding Kim Jong Il’s rise as the official interpreter and developer of *juche* in the 1970s and 1980s, *juche* would

always be the ideology of his father. The deceased “Great Leader” was later memorialized as the “Eternal President” in the revised constitution of 1998, alongside his *juche* doctrine. Kim Jong Il, who had become supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army in 1991 and chairman of National Defense Commission (NDC) in 1993, succeeded his father as head of the North Korean state in 1994—the office of president was dissolved—subsequently assuming the position of general secretary of the WPK in 1997 and being reconfirmed as NDC chairman in 1998. *Juche*, by this point, proved ideologically powerless in face of the post-Soviet economic collapse, decades-long U.S. and U.N. economic sanctions, natural calamities (floods and droughts), and the mass starvations of the mid-late 1990s, out of which some 200,000 to 3.5 million people died. With the loss of the great Soviet economic benefactor, the worldwide discrediting of Marxism-Leninism, and the impotence of *juche*, not to mention fear of a military coup like the one in 1989 that overthrew Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausecu, who was close to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il sought to mobilize popular and military support with appeals to ethnic nationalism and with his *songun* (military-first) doctrine. *Songun* is not a new ideology, to be sure, but consistent with Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla tradition and the military line he initiated in 1962.

Because Kim Jong Il’s authority is an outgrowth of Kim Il Sung’s, *songun* is acknowledged in the official political literature as an embodiment of *juche*.<sup>72</sup> The ethnic nationalism of *songun* is more overt, needless to say. One should note that as part of the effort to amass support in the post-Soviet 1990s, North Korea claimed to have discovered the tomb of Tan’gun, the mythic founder of ancient Korea, and his wife in Pyongyang on October 2, 1993, dating his bones to around 3,108 BCE.<sup>73</sup> The tomb was reconstructed as a mausoleum and opened to the public on October 3, 1994. Chŏng Tasan, incidentally, did not believe in the existence of Tan’gun Chosŏn.<sup>74</sup> Political sociologist Gi-Wook Shin has suggested that Kim Jong Il’s blood-based nationalism echoes that of the colonial-era organic nationalists Sin Ch’aeho, Yi Kwangsu, and Ch’oe Namsŏn. Shin adds, “North Korea has developed an organic, defensive, chauvinistic form of nationalism, akin to what the earlier Korean nationalists had advocated in the face of national peril.”<sup>75</sup> Sin Ch’aeho (1880–1936), a historian and anarchist who is esteemed in North Korea, was the first to center the ethnic nation in Korean historiography. He used the myths of Tan’gun and common ethnic descent as a narrative of resistance against Japanese colonialism and imperialism.<sup>76</sup> The nationalism of Kim Jong Il, which is indebted to Sin, is already seen in the 1955 *juche* speech, except that it was not the political fashion in the Soviet Stalinist epoch to articulate

nationalism without ritualistic references to the “working class,” by which Kim Il Sung always meant the ethnic-racial nation, the *minjok*. *Juche*, pursuing the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country,” always had a nationalist *modus operandi*. Stalinism, with its strong element of archaization, reinforces ethnic nationalism and nativist revivalism. The North Korean turn to the archaic past is also symptomatic of a besieged and impoverished regime whose ideology of legitimation needs to be conceptually renovated. That is seen in the narrative of “symbolic ancestry,” which traces Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il to great “*Korean* historical figures.”<sup>77</sup> Tasan is one of those great figures, and he had already been recognized as such in 1955.

## Conclusion

Confucianism and the North Korean *juche* ideology pose special philosophical and historical problems that have not been properly appreciated in North Koreans studies. Consequently, *juche* has simply been associated with Neo-Confucianism, in general, and Chu Hsi, in particular. That is mistaken. *juche*, rather, assimilates the Reformed Confucianism of *sirhak* and Chŏng Tasan, something that began with the admonishment in Kim Il Sung’s 1955 *juche* speech to study and publicize progressive *sirhak* intellectuals, such as Pak Yŏnam and Chŏng Tasan. This article sheds new light on *juche*, traces the rise of Tasan in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the official reaction against him in the mid-1960s, his assimilation into *juche*-Stalinism in the 1970s, and his eventual reemergence in the 1990s.<sup>78</sup> Since that decade, there has been noticeable interest in Tasan in North Korean journals.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, in May 2009, a month after North Korea dropped “communism” from its revised *songun* constitution, the international and multilingual magazine *Korea Today* celebrated the *sirhak* school as patriotic, progressive, and reformist and Tasan as a gifted realist and materialist who was anti-feudal, pro-peasant, and pro-national defense.<sup>80</sup> There is a possibility that in its gradual adoption of economic reform measures, the nationalist-Stalinist North Korean regime is finding justification for capitalist restorationism through *sirhak* and Tasan. But that does not mean Tasanism will be adopted as a new official ideology. Instead, Tasanism may serve an auxiliary function to *songun*, which is summed up in Kim Jong Il’s slogan “precedence of the army over the working class.” Relevant to the political content of that slogan is North Korean recognition that Tasan, like other *sirhak* scholars, never reflected the interests of working people.<sup>81</sup> Tasan represented the social interests of

the reforming elite in the late Chosŏn era in a period of economic stagnation and decay. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in 1991, the North Korean bureaucratic elite has confronted an economic and ideological crisis and, in its struggle for political survival, has re-appreciated the Tasanist component of *juche* ideology.

## Postscript

The author thanks Dr. Suk Hi Kim of the University of Detroit Mercy for explaining that Confucianism and *juche* ideology are integral to the prolongation and survival of the North Korean regime. Preliminary research for this article included reading on Chu Hsi Neo-Confucianism, the most influential form of Confucianism in Korea, upon which it was realized that Chu Hsi's thought and *juche* are philosophically dissimilar. Chŏng Tasan became the focus of attention in the course of gathering and reading academic papers on philosophy by South Korean scholars. The significance of Tasan's presence in Kim Il Sung's 1955 *juche* speech was recognized when the author read Kyong-Dong Kim's essay "The Aborted Confucian Reformation in Korea's Incipient Modernization" (1988). While not about the reception of Tasan in North Korea, that work contains a suggestive sentence on the North Korean view of Tasan, as well as a bibliography listing four North Korean books related to the *sirhak* scholar. After that, things began to come together. Before the encounter with Tasan, the author had considered Adrian Buzo's argument in *The Guerrilla Dynasty* (1999) that Stalinist North Korea has little in common with Neo-Confucianism politically. The author's position, as stated in earlier publications, is that Neo-Confucianism is part of the pre-history of North Korean national-Stalinism and part of the ideological substratum of *juche* ideology. Here, the author agrees with G. W. F. Hegel, who says the latest philosophy contains, embraces, and is the product and result of those that preceded it.<sup>82</sup> Chŏng Tasan, as this article discusses, is a more recent source of influence in North Korea from the late feudal period, and *juche* is an ideology that stands between the traditions of Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism.

## Notes

1. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 19, Questia, <http://www.questia.com/read/87109852> (accessed Dec. 19, 2010).

2. Bruce Cumings, "Nation of the Sun King: North Korea, 1953–Present," *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 423.

3. See Charles K. Armstrong, "Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2005): 383–94; Charles K. Armstrong, "'A Socialism of Our Style': North Korean Ideology in the Post-Communist Era," *North Korean Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 132–714; Bruce Cumings, "The Corporate State in North Korea," *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 197–230; Han S. Park, *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); and Leonid A. Petrov, "Restoring the Glorious Past: *Juch'e* in Korean Historiography," *North Korean Studies*, 2003, [http://north-korea.narod.ru/glorious\\_past.htm](http://north-korea.narod.ru/glorious_past.htm) (accessed May 16, 2010).

4. See Yu-Lan Fung, "Neo-Confucianism: The School of Platonic Ideas," *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 294–306, and Yu-Lan Fung and Derk Bodde, "The Philosophy of Chu Hsi," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1942): 1–51, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717813> (accessed May 16, 2010).

5. Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), 477–78, Questia, <http://www.questia.com/read/56854299> (accessed Dec. 19, 2010).

6. Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953–1964* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005), 57–58, 78–81.

7. Il Sung Kim, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work," *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965), 316–17; emphasis added. KAPF stands for Korea Artista Proleta Federatio in Esperanto. The KAPF was a "proletarian literature" organization that operated in colonial Korea from 1925 to 1935.

8. Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*, 500.

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15. Il Sung Kim, "On Eliminating Dogmatism," 324–25.
16. Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea*, 511.
17. Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 166; Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea*, 145, 171.
18. The preface of *Progressive Scholars at the Close of the Feudal Age in Korea* is dated May 5, 1954, a year and seven months before the *juche* speech. While Stalin, Lenin, and Engels are mentioned in the text, the work is fervently nationalistic. The final chapter on Tasan stands out with the following closing line: "[H]is idea and work *will be inherited and developed* as a noble tradition of our national culture" (p. 143; emphasis added). Chöng Tasan was in store to be politically assimilated.
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33. Jong Il Kim, "On Stamping Out the Ideologically Evil Consequences of the Anti-Party, Counter-Revolutionary Elements and Establishing the Party's Monolithic Ideological System," 1967, E-Asia, Univ. of Oregon Libraries, <http://www.libweb.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/read/borg-a22.pdf> (accessed Dec. 19, 2010).

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Kim, "The Changing Roles of Intellectuals," *North Korea under Kim Jong Il: From Consolidation to Systemic Dissonance* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2006), 165–191.

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